

Anxious to show off the goods

By Jan Shepherd
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

MANCHESTER, N.H.

The Currier Museum of Art website is counting down the seconds until 11 a.m. next Sunday, when it reopens after almost two years and a \$21.4 million expansion.

Heralding the added 33,000 square feet with exhibits drawn from its American and European collections, the Currier will offer free admission, gallery talks, performances, and other special activities through April 5. The exhibits, on view through September, feature a mix of familiar and rarely shown works and recent acquisitions.

"We're opening the museum with the permanent collections in order to show our rich holdings," said director Susan Strickler during a late February tour. "We're 60 percent larger with this expansion. We'll be able to show more glass, silver, pewter, and rotate works on paper."

Founded in 1929 in a Victorian-era neighborhood east of downtown, the Beaux Arts building's first expansion in 1980 added a pair of matching pavilions. Today the Currier occupies two blocks bounded by Orange, Ash, Prospect, and Beech streets. The museum also owns Zimmerman House, a Frank Lloyd Wright-designed home open for tours by appointment, and the Currier Art Center, a visual arts school on nearby Pearl Street.

"The primary reason for the expansion is to show more of the collections and be able to accommodate audiences," said Strickler. "We knew the quality of the collections deserved a wider audience and a wider cross-section of the state. We began to build those kind of audiences with special exhibitions, but realized we couldn't accommodate people for larger, popular shows. We often turned a gallery into a cafe. In addition, the old building had maxed out for school groups."

Four years ago, the museum hired Ann Beha Architects of Boston to create a master plan. "A two-phase expansion was considered, but we decided that would be too chaotic," said Strickler. "Doing it all at once would be more economical and less disruptive."

That also meant it would close during construction, so the museum created Currier on the Move to keep it in the public eye. Two docents in a colorful van crisscrossed the state making art presentations at schools,

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community centers, and libraries. They visited 245 classrooms and 4,500 students. Curators and others involved in the expansion gave 17 themed programs in four regions of the state, focusing on potential audiences and donors and reaching about 600 people. In late June 2006, crews packed and

transferred more than 11,000 objects — from artwork to furniture — to a storage company in Massachusetts. The staff and administrators worked in nearby buildings, including a Victorian house after it had been moved from the museum's parking lot.

In a phone interview, lead architect Pamela Hawkes said, "The challenge was to add to the 1929 building and the two 1980 wings with sensitivity while offering the functionality the museum wanted. People who knew the museum and have favorite galleries still have those while we created new ones."

The dramatic differences come into focus the minute you drive up. Glass walls and interlocking terra-cotta panels on the south facade create an interplay of light and dark. Hawkes chose basalt, a natural stone with a tooth finish, for accent pieces on the facade because it reminded her of New Hampshire's granite cliffs. The big terra-cotta panels are baked masonry with a soft, matte finish, a nod to the bricks in older sections.

The building's larger footprint puts it closer to the sidewalks on three sides while the original Orange Street south entrance becomes an interior element. "With the changes, we weren't wrapping the old structures but adding to them so you see all three eras of the museum," Hawkes said. "We wanted to make the entrance sequencing more spacious, more welcoming. We also used lots of glass to help open up the museum."

Various styles of glass control light. Glass also became Hawkes's device for revealing and connecting different buildings. For example, the entrance lobby has floor-to-ceiling glass and links the 1980 pavilions. From here one admires the outdoor courtyard and "Origins," a towering red-and-black steel sculpture by Mark di Suvero that was installed in the fall. The



large glass doors open into the visitors' reception area and a glass-walled gift shop.

The Winter Garden, an enclosed plaza, connects the 1929 building to new galleries with a roof that features two styles of skylights. With an outdoor ambience, the "garden" doubles as a cafe and a place for receptions and gala benefits. "The Winter Garden is our party palace," said Strickler.

The Winter Garden is framed by old and new public art. The 1930s mosaic at the former entrance inspired the late Sol LeWitt's "Whirls and Twirls," a pair of bold wall paintings he designed for the museum in 2006, the year before he died. His studio artists completed the colorful patterns last month.

A handsome 120-seat auditorium at ground level features high windows and cherry paneling. The floors of the restrooms here are eye-catching because artist Tom Schulz laid out a colorful stained concrete pattern inspired by the 1930s mosaic.

As we walked through galleries, Strickler pointed out some of the recent acquisitions made possible by Henry Melville Fuller, a trustee for 37 years who died in 2001. He bequeathed the Currier \$43 million, with half earmarked for the endowment, the remainder for purchases. A Manchester native and New York stockbroker, he also donated 60 paintings and works on paper from his personal collection. A few years earlier, he had given the museum more than 300 glass paperweights, considered one of the nation's top five collections.

After the Fuller financial gift, the museum formed a plan for acquisitions to fill in gaps in the collections. "We also wanted to look at a wider range of American voices, to add more African-American and Latin American artists," said Strickler.

LeWitt's "Whirls and Twirls" and di Suvero's "Origins" are among the Fuller buys. The furniture gallery gained "Overmantel

Picture," a painting on wood that had been in an Exeter, N.H., home, and an 18th-century chair.

Martin Johnson Heade's "Singing Beach, Manchester-by-the-Sea," Balthasar van der Ast's 1617 "Still Life of Fruit on a Kraak Porcelain Dish," Albert Bierstadt's "Mt. Hood, Oregon," Childe Hassam's "Columbus Avenue, Boston," and Thomas Cole's "Mill Dam on the Catskill Creek" are among painting purchases. The Currier also has been buying period frames with Fuller money.

Some of the collections' rarely seen works are up, among them a Franco-Flemish tapestry that dates to 1510. The restored weaving is rich in color and details as it depicts the arrival of Gypsies in a village. It hangs with other period works, among them "Holy Family," a circa 1510 painting by Joos van Cleve.

Special changing exhibits begin in the fall. Timed to coincide with the election campaign, "Andy Warhol: Pop Politics" opens in late September with political imagery and sound-video from his career.

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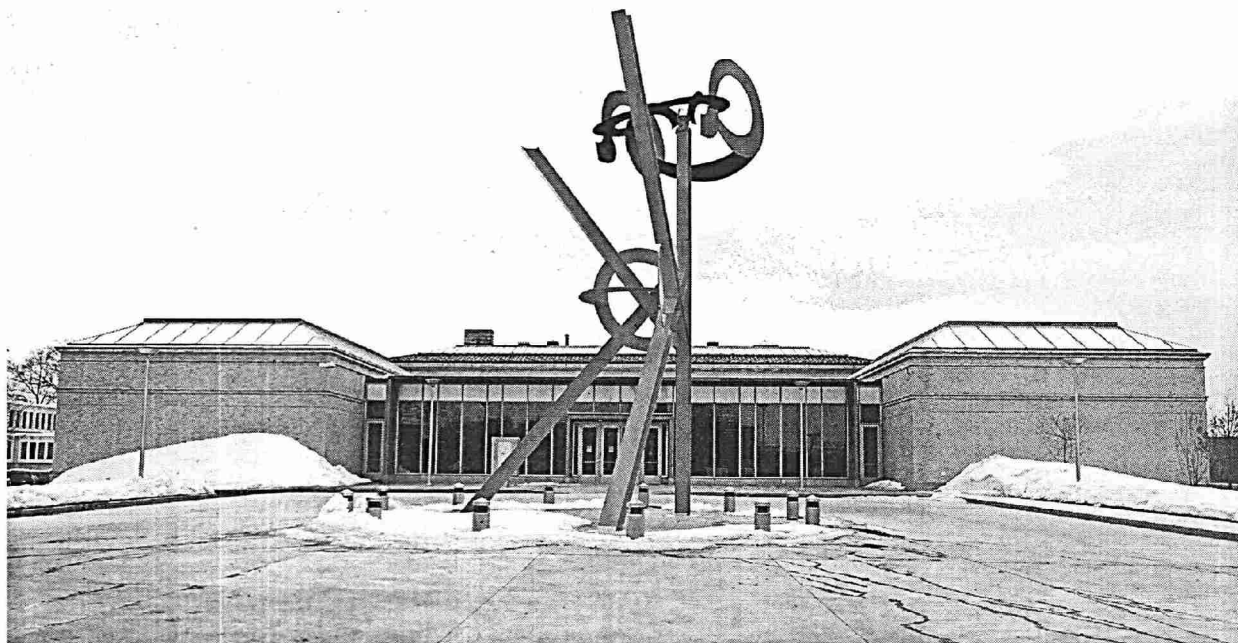
Currier Museum of Art

150 Ash St.
 Manchester, N.H.
 603-669-6144; currier.org
 Reopens March 30, with special activities 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Free admission through April 5.

Sunday, Monday, Wednesday-Friday 11 a.m.-5 p.m., Saturday 10-5, first Thursday of the month 11-8, closed Tuesdays. Admission \$10, seniors \$9, students \$8, under 18 free. With Zimmerman House Tour (given March-December) \$16, seniors \$15, students \$14,

ages 7-17 \$6.

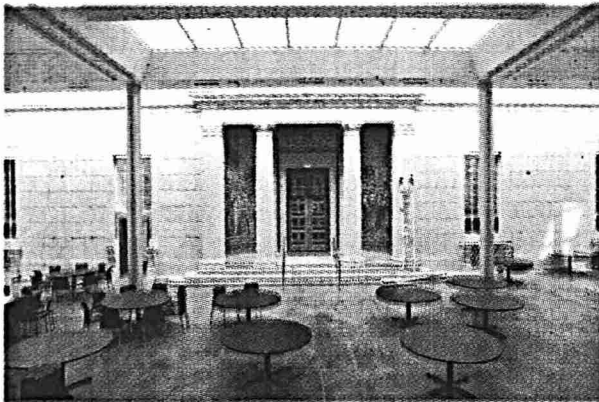
Directions: The museum is 53 miles from Boston. Take Interstate 93 north to exit 8 (Wellington Road/Bridge Street). Bear right onto Bridge Street and go 1½ miles to Ash Street (after the second full traffic light). Turn right onto Ash Street. The Currier is a quarter mile on the left. Handicapped parking in museum lot. Accessible drop-off and pickup at the museum entrance. Parking available on side streets.



PHOTOS BY MARK WILSON/GLOBE STAFF

"Origins," a sculpture by Mark di Suvero, stands in front of the renovated entrance to the Currier Museum of Art in Manchester, N.H. Ashlee Bailey and Jake Bernier worked to prepare a display case before the reopening next Sunday.





PHOTOS BY MARK WILSON/GLOBE STAFF

The Winter Garden cafe encloses the old entrance and joins the old building to new galleries with some recent acquisitions.

After almost two years, the Currier Museum of Art will reopen to more space, artwork, visitors, and regional influence